



MYANMAR ANALYTICAL ACTIVITY AD HOC INFORMATION REQUEST

NO. 007: YANGON ACTIVISM AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

July 2019

Contract Number: 72048218C00004

Acknowledgement

This report is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of Kimetrica and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government. This report has been written by Kimetrica (www.kimetrica.com) and Mekong Economics (www.mekongeconomics.com) as part of the Myanmar Analytical Activity, and is therefore the exclusive property of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Melissa Earl (Kimetrica) is the author of this report and is reachable at melissa.earl@kimetrica.com or at Kimetrica LLC, 80 Garden Center, Suite A-368, Broomfield, CO 80020. The authors' views in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government. The author would like to thank Harriet McFadzean, Dominic Lianpi, and Sane Lei Nwe, (Mekong Economics) for their invaluable insights, field work, interviews and report writing and Selma Kalousek for her editorial support.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Ad Hoc Information Request looks at the role political activism plays in Yangon's cultural scene, with a focus on artistic forms of expression. The report summarizes the use of art and performance in the political realm and how it has changed throughout Yangon's post-colonial history. It discusses leading forms of artistic expression and artists' messaging and influence in the country, as well as the challenges these artists face in Yangon.

In the last decade, a proliferation of new artistic forms, like the online *meme culture* and punk rock have emerged, protesting human rights abuses by the military (Tatmadaw), the Government, and religious groups such as the Ma Ba Tha. More traditional forms of artistic political activism, such as *Thangyat* and *Anyeint* performance art, continue to dominate Yangon's cultural activist scene. While punk bands have attracted the attention of the international community, their scope of influence within Myanmar is limited to the punk music subculture.

Perceptions of the political counterculture are still mostly negative, and a lack of public spaces for art installations limits activists' influence. In addition, the threat of arrest has led many in Yangon's artistic community to practice self-censorship. Although the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government was originally seen as supportive of politically active artists, recent signs, such as the elimination of political cartoons from state-run newspapers, indicate that these artists face similar threats to activism and expression as their counterparts in more traditional media and civil society.

Still, artists in Yangon are becoming more prominent, their influence boosted by the ease of sharing their art and message on social media. In Yangon, the tie between the cultural scene and political activism is strong, and artists will likely continue using their art to political ends, even if the Government forces many underground.



INTRODUCTION

Political and social activism have shaped Myanmar's history and, particularly in Yangon, led to changes throughout the country. The '88 Student Uprising and the Saffron Revolution protests began in Yangon. Religious and student organizations are largely considered the main instigators of political activism and protests, but there are performing artists, poets and musicians who are also politically active. The cultural scene and political activism are especially connected in Yangon, where they evolved naturally from traditional Thangyat performances criticizing the monarchy to live performances and the popular meme culture pervasive on social media today.

In this report, Yangon activism and cultural influences are explored through the music scene – punk rock, visual activism, written activism, and performance art. All four forms of artistic expression are part of a wider analysis of historical trends in culture and activism, with a focus on how popular and influential they are today, and the challenges artists face.

This report draws chiefly on primary data collected from artists, musicians, and experts on cultural influences and activism in Yangon, and from focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with Yangon residents. Each FGD includes a variety of individuals, differing in age, gender, and occupation. News articles and scholarly essays were consulted to understand the history and put the current state of activism in Yangon into context.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN YANGON OVER TIME

Before 1962: During the colonial era, Myanmar's artists enjoyed relatively high levels of freedom of expression, with poets like Dagon Taryar forming the "New Writing Movement," also known as leftist poetry.¹ To disseminate their message, activists used Thangyat – comedic poetry performed at the Thingyan (Burmese New Year Festival), and Anyeint – a form of traditional Burmese entertainment, comedic song and dance routines, literature, paintings, and poems. After the founding of the University in the 1920s, contemporary literature became a leading medium of activism in the capital.²

1962-1988: Restrictions on freedom of expression under the military junta government meant that many artistic dissidents focused on the corrupt nature of the regime. Protests through Anyeint performances peaked in the 1970s when the *Hundred Moon Troupe* publicly spoke up on democratic issues, a significant risk to the troupe's personal security at the time. The activists of the '88 Student Uprising inspired protest songs such as "Kar-Bar-Ma-Kyay-Bue" (translation: "we will not be satisfied 'till the end of the world"), as well as Thangyat group performances like "Goat Mouth and All-Seeing Eye," and satirical cartoons.³

1988-2011: Performance art and poetry emerged as common methods of activism after the '88 Student Uprising. Phyu Mon, reportedly the first female performance artist, used balloons to describe the pressures of tyranny and censorship (see annex), and famous poems such as "February 14" by San Wai, inspired

¹ Rachel Won, "Poetry and Politics in Myanmar", *The Point* (Chicago, US), 2019. <https://thepointmag.com/2016/politics/poetry-politics-myanmar>

² Wei Yan Aung, Colonial Era Champion of Burmese Language and Literature, *The Irrawaddy*, March 22, 2019. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/on-this-day/colonial-era-champion-burmese-language-literature.html>

³ Lwin Mar Htun, Song writer who provided theme song to 8888 uprising finally honored, *The Irrawaddy*, August 9, 2018. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/songwriter-provided-theme-song-8888-uprising-finally-honored.html>; Supriya Ambwani, Chantip Tatiyakaroonwary, Kristna Yasuda, *Artistic Expression in Myanmar*, Nationalism and State Building in Myanmar, May 29, 2019.

participation in the Saffron Revolution.⁴ The Government's attempts to suppress these methods were unsuccessful because activists found ways to circulate their messages. For instance, Thangyat groups living in exile would send CDs across the border into Myanmar.⁵

Thangyat groups, cartoonists, and performance artists were at the forefront of denouncing the Government's actions during the Saffron Revolution. Many new counterculture activists were also born in the aftermath of the Saffron Revolution, like the punk rock band *Rebel Riot* and *Generation Wave*, a group of activists that includes ex-rappers who use graffiti and music to express artistic dissent.⁶

2011-2015: When the Thein Sein Government abolished the Press Scrutiny Board, artists began to create politically themed works more openly. Photography and videography became common forms of expression, advanced by initiatives like the Human Rights Human Dignity Film Festival.⁷ Despite a telecommunications law that banned support for the NLD, musicians often attended NLD rallies and released songs about peace and human rights.

2015-Present: After the NLD came to power, political art and photography exhibitions, such as *Seven Decade* and *Beyond the Prison Gate*, which focused on political prisoners, proliferated in Yangon. During the 2015 campaign and immediately after the election, the NLD signaled support for free artistic expression with events such as the Myanmar Political Festival, which included an Anyeint competition. However, the NLD-led Government also arrested artists like the *Peacock Generation* Thangyat group and the poet Maung Saung Kha, demonstrating limits on its tolerance for artistic forms of political activism.⁸

⁴ Arrests of Political Activists Increase in Myanmar, *Amnesty International*, January 5, 2018.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2008/01/arrests-political-activists-increase-myanmar-20080125/>; Nathalie Johnston, *The Mobility of Struggle, Myanmar's Performance Art as Protect*, Interactive, July 15, 2013. <https://interartive.org/2014/01/myanmars-performance/>

⁵ Htun Khaing, Thangyat under scrutiny as NLD goes back to the past, *Frontier*, April 13, 2017.

<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/thangyat-under-scrutiny-as-nld-goes-back-to-the-past>

⁶ Scream for Human Rights: Punks, Monks and Politics in Myanmar, *Al Jazeera*, March 27, 2019.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/human-rights-punks-monks-politics-myanmar-190317102309634.html>; Khazar Fatemi, *The Young Generation in Myanmar Fighting for Change*, *Huffington Post*, September 11, 2015. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/generation-wave-saffron-revolution-myanmar_n_563cd782e4b0b24aee4a02ee

⁷ Ben Dunant, Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi and the Jealous Nation, *Frontier*, June 27, 2019. <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/min-htin-ko-ko-gyi-and-the-jealous-nation>

⁸ Rachel Wong, "Poetry and Politics in Myanmar", *The Point* (Chicago, US), 2019. <https://thepointmag.com/2016/politics/poetry-politics-myanmar>; Nwe Ei Ei Htwe, Suu Kyi urges artists to get political, *Myanmar Times*, July 17, 2019. <https://www.mmtimes.com/lifestyle/11534-daw-suu-calls-on-artists-to-address-politics.html>; Myanmar News Agency, Myanmar Democracy Festival to be held with anyeint and dances, *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, August 20, 2017. <http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/myanmar-democracy-festival-to-be-held-with-anyeint-and-dances/>; Zarni Mann, Thangyat Troupe Member Arrested over Performance Satirizing Military, *The Irrawaddy*, April 19, 2019. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/thangyat-troupe-member-arrested-performance-satirizing-military.html>

BRITISH
COLONIAL

MILITARY
REGIME /
BSP

SLORC /
SPDC

USDP NLD

1824 - 1948

1962 - 1988

1988 - 2011

2011 - 2015 - PRESENT

myanmar activism

cultural influences

1947 JUL

General Aung San Is Assassinated

Leader of Myanmar's independence movement and "Father of the Nation", General Aung San, is assassinated.

1948 JAN

Independence Day

Myanmar becomes an independent country under the Burma Independence Act 1947.

1962 LATE

Introduction of Pre-Publication Censorship Law

Introduction of the Printers and Publishers Registration Law which forces publishers and printers to submit copies of their manuscripts to the Press Scrutiny Board.

2007 AUG-OCT

Saffron Revolution

Economic and political protests are triggered over the government's removal of fuel subsidies. Buddhist monks hold a series of anti-government protests.

2008 MAY

2008 Constitutional Referendum

The Burmese military government hold a referendum on a draft constitution following Cyclone Nargis.

2010 NOV

Aung San Suu Kyi Is Released

After spending 15 of 21 years under house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi, along with a few other political prisoners, is released.

2012 AUG

Abolishment of Pre-Publication Censorship Law

2012 SEP

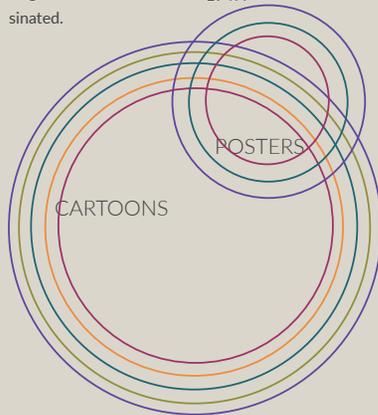
Leader of '88 Student Uprising Returns to Myanmar

The Government removes 2,082 people from its blacklist, and political activists like Moe Thee Zun, a known leader of '88 Student Uprising, returns to Myanmar.

2018

Free Speech Protests

The arrest of two Reuters journalists sparks free speech demonstrations.



1988 AUG

'88 Student Uprising

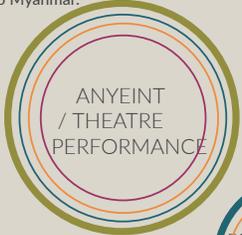
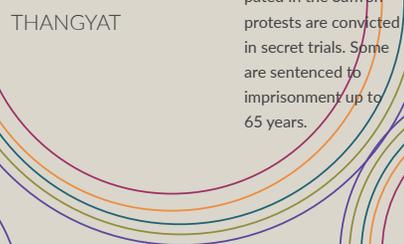
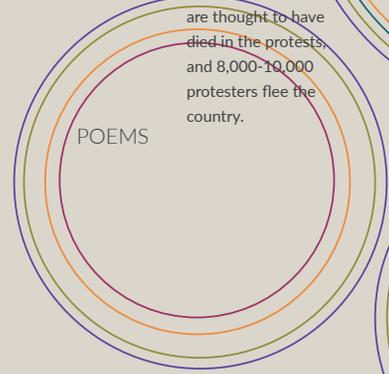
Nationwide protests against the Burma Socialist Programme Party ends in a coup by SLORC. Aung San Suu Kyi emerges as a leader for democratic reform. Thousands are thought to have died in the protests, and 8,000-10,000 protesters flee the country.

2008 NOV

Secret Trials of Political Prisoners

Activists who participated in the Saffron protests are convicted in secret trials. Some are sentenced to imprisonment up to 65 years.

Circle colors correspond to emergence period while outer circle sizes indicate cultural age and significance. Thick outline denotes an emergence of new cultural influences.



Aung Kyi Soe, Scar Series, 2018

MAJOR ACTIVIST GROUPS

THE MUSIC SCENE

Music plays a significant role in activism in Yangon, both in popular culture and the underground subcultures. A member of *Generation Wave* interviewed for this report explained that music is used to bring public attention to pressing socioeconomic and political issues, and to encourage the public to join movements. Key informants and FGD participants named Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, Saw Phoe Khwar, Ni Ni Khin Zaw, Lynn Lynn, She, Tun Eindra Bo, and Annaga as famous musicians and activists. Their lyrics often address the peace process and human rights, and some songs promoted the NLD during the campaign period for the 2015 general election.

Musicians who use underground channels – like practicing and performing in secret and in abandoned buildings – to spread their message include *Side Effect*, *Rebel Riot*, *Culture Shock*, *A Letter from Caesar*, *Indie Band*, *Big Boy*, and *Floke Rose*. These bands primarily focus on human rights issues. According to the *Generation Wave* band member, it is important to note that these musicians do not see themselves as political activists. Words like “politician” and “political activist” carry negative connotations, because politicians are often seen as opportunists. Consequently, these musicians refer to themselves as *Anuhpyingya*, or artists, not political activists.

Of the different types of musicians and groups, punk rock band members are the most prominent activists in Myanmar. Punk culture was reportedly first imported to Myanmar in the 1990s by a sailor who came across punk music CDs while traveling abroad.⁹ The subculture spread in Yangon. The band *Rebel Riot* caught the attention of the international community for its prominent and fearless stance on the Rohingya crisis, which it openly refers to as genocide. They also have a song with the title “Genocide.”

Rebel Riot, which is part of a larger punk community called *Common Street*, was founded in 2007, just after the Saffron Revolution, as a way to protest military brutality.¹⁰ A member of *Generation Wave* told Mekong researchers that the band focuses on human rights, especially on the use of religion to justify communal violence in Rakhine State and the ongoing conflict with the Arakan Army. However, a researcher close to the members of *Rebel Riot* said that the band does not see itself as political because it focuses on many important issues beyond politics, including basic human rights and the use of Buddhism to promote religious persecution and violence.

Despite restrictions on freedom of expression, it is relatively easy to understand the *Rebel Riot*’s bold messages as showcased in its three albums titled *Puppet Society*, *F**k Religious Rule/Wars*, and *No Place to Live*. “Genocide,” one of their latest songs that references the Rohingya crisis, includes the lyrics “blood thirsty military pigs” and “f**k religious rules.” Most surprisingly, despite the overt messages encapsulated in their songs, members of the band have never been threatened with arrest. One expert believes the reason is that they do not name the Tatmadaw (military) specifically in their songs. Furthermore, owing to the negative stereotypes surrounding the punk subculture, the *Rebel Riot* expert believes that the authorities do not take the group seriously, regarding the members as “drunkards” and “drug-abusers.”

⁹ Paul Gregoire, “Meet the Burmese Punks Feeding Their Country’s Homeless”, *Vice*, July 14, 2015. https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/zngmx8/the-myanmar-punks-feeding-yangoons-homeless

¹⁰ Scream for Human Rights: Punk, Monks and Politics in Myanmar, *Aljazeera*, March 27, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/human-rights-punks-monks-politics-myanmar-190317102309634.html>

The band vehemently denies abusing either substance. The member of *Generation Wave* also explained that the underground and fringe nature of the group, as well as its use of abandoned buildings to perform, protects it from attracting the attention of authorities.

Religious institutions have raised concerns, however, especially after the release of the documentary *My Buddha is Punk* in 2015 – about a young punk rocker who uses his music to raise awareness of social issues – and after *Rebel Riot* tried to promote religious co-existence by dressing up, posing and performing a song as Buddha, Shiva, and Jesus in 2017. This caught the attention of the nationalist Buddhist organization *Ma Ba Tha*, forcing the group to publicly apologize “for having upset those who misinterpreted the photo.”¹¹

In spite of the band’s international exposure, which peaked with a European tour in 2016, information gleaned from FGDs indicates that the general population does not necessarily know the band for its music or activism, but is somewhat aware of its charitable activities, including feeding and educating the homeless through their *Food Not Bombs* and *Books Not Bombs* initiatives. The band’s narrow influence in Myanmar could also be attributed to the limited popularity of punk rock, as local radio stations focus on more mainstream genres such as pop, ballads, and, sometimes, rock. The band is primarily known on the international and local punk scene, and by those interested in activism in Yangon.

Still, activists’ music became more widespread as social media sharing platforms grew in popular use. According to the FGD participants, Soundcloud, P-Cloud and Facebook are the most common platforms used to share music. But the FGD participants claim that Thangyat and Anyeint remain more influential than modern music. Many FGD respondents, especially older respondents, struggled to name activist bands, whereas they easily identified traditional Thangyat and Anyeint groups.

THE WRITTEN WORD

Professional writers, poets, and cartoonists helped shape the politics of post-colonial Myanmar. Before social media platforms were introduced, literature was one of the most important means of sharing knowledge and encapsulating political and social movements. Historically, the city of Mandalay was the cultural hub for literature in Myanmar, but most contemporary writers live in Yangon. Over the decades, the Government has persecuted many outspoken authors and poets. Many politically active writers, like Ludu Daw Amar, her husband Ludu U Hla, and journalist Win Tin died of old age in recent years.¹² Still, the advent of social media has only increased the reach of the country’s literati.

Many of Myanmar’s well-known contemporary authors write for high circulation newspapers and journals, and post frequently on Facebook. Some of the more well-known contemporary writers include Sit Thu Aung Myint (*Frontier*); Myo Thein (*Radio Free Asia* and *Eleven Media Group*); Mon Mon Myat (*Irrawaddy*); Kyaw Win, Zeyar Thu, and Kyaw Min Swe (*The Voice Journal*); Aung Thu Nyein, Min Zin, Sumon Thazin Aung (Institute for Strategy and Policy - Myanmar); Dr. Ngun Cung Lian (Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security); and former Information Minister, Ye Htut.

Rhyme-less modern or contemporary poems derived from *Khit San* – a literary movement in 1930’s

¹¹ Sam Littlefair, “Watch the trailer for ‘My Buddha is Punk’”, *Lion’s Roar*, December 17, 2015.

<https://www.lionsroar.com/watch-the-trailer-for-my-buddha-is-punk/>; Coconuts Yangon, “Punk Band Rebel Riot Apologizes to Buddhist Supremacists for Interfaith Photoshoot,” *Coconuts Yangon* (Yangon, Myanmar) March 31, 2017. <https://coconuts.co/yangon/news/punk-band-rebel-riot-apologizes-to-buddhist-supremacists-for-interfaith-photoshoot/>

¹² Poppy McPherson, “Myanmar: After the Protests, Out Come the Cartoonists”, *The Diplomat*, March 22, 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/after-the-protests-out-come-the-cartoonists/>

Htein Lin and Vicky Bowman, “Contemporary Burmese Poetry”, *The World*, May 2009. http://www.wolfmagazine.co.uk/21_burmese.php

Myanmar – are popular in Yangon.¹³ These modern poems, introduced in the 1970s, are written from the perspective of ordinary people, usually against the Government. The poet Zeyar Lin said that these poems traditionally capture the stance of the people’s criticisms of the Government, using “I” as a representation of the people, but these poets no longer focus on political activism as they once did before the NLD came to power.¹⁴ FGD respondents noted that this form of poetry and poetry events – where writers, poets, celebrity activists, and former political prisoners criticized the government – were popular under the USDP government but are less so today.

Cartoons and illustrations, which frequently contain messages of criticism, are another popular manifestation of cultural influence in Myanmar. Unlike other forms of written activism, cartoons and illustrations have reportedly led to no arrests for defamation in recent years.¹⁵ However, a Yangon cartoonist said that while this type of political commentary was included in state newspapers in the early days of the NLD Government, it is no longer accepted, signaling that the Government has grown increasingly sensitive about it. Alternative media, including the *Bullet Journal*, a print journal affiliated with the Ma Ba Tha and the USDP, often use cartoons to criticize the Government.¹⁶ Today, cartoons are often shared on social media.

About 60 percent of Myanmar's population uses social media, primarily Facebook.¹⁷ This way of sharing and getting news is steadily growing and with it opportunities for activism as citizens exchange opinions, photographs, and news stories. The widespread use of social media has also led to new forms of activism, including what is referred to as the *meme culture*. Yangon and national politicians, such as the Yangon Chief Minister Phyto Min Thein, former president Thein Sein, are often targets of memes. Sometimes General Than Shwe and Aung San Suu Kyi are targets, but these memes are shared discreetly.¹⁸

Although memes are not considered as sensitive as other forms of activism, in 2015, a Facebook user in Yangon was arrested for sharing a meme criticizing the uniform of military members with a picture and the quote, “They like the color of Mother Suu’s sarong so much, they are wearing it.”¹⁹ Another Facebook user, the husband of a prominent Kachin and women’s rights activist, was arrested for sharing a meme depicting a man wearing a Kachin longyi (a longyi is a sheet of cloth widely worn in Myanmar), stepping on a picture of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.²⁰ The man contends that his account had been hacked. Since 2015, people, including poet Maung Saungkha, have been arrested under Telecommunications Act 66(D) for online social media posts.²¹ While the rapid adoption of social media has paved the way to a richer form of expression, it has also increased the Government’s ability to penalize its critics.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rachel Wong, “Poetry and Politics in Myanmar”, *The Point* (Chicago, US), 2019. <https://thepointmag.com/2016/politics/poetry-politics-myanmar>

¹⁵ Poppy McPhearson, March 22, 2015; Personal communication with a key informant for this report, July 2019.

¹⁶ A photograph of the print journal, *Bullet Journal*, can be found online here:

https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=%E1%80%98%E1%80%AF%E1%80%9C%E1%80%80%E1%80%B9%20%E1%80%82%E1%80%BA%E1%80%AC%E1%80%94%E1%80%9A%E1%80%B9&epa=SEARCH_BOX; Wanna Aung, “Will sue if used cartoons without permission of the artist” (Burmese language), *7Day Daily Newspaper*, July 7, 2019. <http://54.255.198.232/story/160564>;

¹⁷ Tej Parikh, Social Media exhibits its disruptive power in Myanmar, *The Diplomat*, November 9, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/social-media-exhibits-its-disruptive-power-in-myanmar/>

¹⁸ Thant Sin, Political Memes Welcome to Myanmar, *Global Voices*, May 27, 2015. <https://globalvoices.org/2015/05/27/political-memes-welcome-to-myanmar/>

¹⁹ Kenneth Wong, Burma cracks down on memes making fun of military, *Kenneth Wong SF*, July 17, 2019 (9:30 am). <http://kennethwongsf.blogspot.com/2015/10/burma-cracks-down-on-memes-making-fun.html>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Christopher Zara, “Jailed for a Facebook Poem: The fight against Myanmar’s draconian defamation laws,” *Fast Company* (New York City, USA) July 13, 2017. <https://www.fastcompany.com/40438242/jailed-for-a-facebook-poem-the-fight-against-myanmars-draconian-defamation-laws>

VISUAL ARTS

Painters and street artists are particularly prominent in Yangon's counterculture. Street art was officially banned in 2013 after the creation of a mural that welcomed US President Barack Obama in 2012. The mural received significant attention and some believe it was, in part, the reason for the ban.²² Nonetheless, legal art exhibitions as well as illicit street art continue to promote messages about unlawful land grabs, power shortages, and censorship. Street artists also caricature military generals and express support for Aung San Suu Kyi.²³ Even when it is not about politics or social issues, street art is in itself a form of activism since it is heavily regulated by Yangon police forces and therefore "exists in a murky legal area."²⁴ In 2015, the French Institute, funded by the French Government, launched the Yangon Street Art Festival to promote street art, but its influence is limited.²⁵ According to FGD respondents, Yangon citizens tend to look down on street art, considering graffiti to be a form of vandalism.

Photographers are more influential than many visual artists in Yangon, but still do not attract significant attention from the general public. A photographer involved in the exhibition *Beyond the Prison Gate*, shown in multiple locations around Yangon in 2018, noted that the event attracted members of the international community, diplomats, friends of the photographer, and families of political prisoners featured in the exhibition, but it failed to attract the capital's general population.²⁶

Other recent photography exhibitions have also not attracted much attention in Yangon, especially when compared to one-off images that depict harrowing atrocities and are published along with news articles. The general lack of interest in exhibitions and galleries was underlined by a prominent contemporary artist, who pointed to the lack of art in public spaces as a contributing factor. The artist told Mekong researchers that if public spaces could be used to showcase art, the general public would become more attuned to photography and other art exhibitions.

Notably, photographers appear to have less fear of arrest. When two Reuters reporters, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, were arrested, it was in part for possession of an image of 10 Rohingya men kneeling, which ran along one of their articles. The photojournalist who took the picture remained free, said the photographer involved in the *Beyond the Prison Gate* exhibition.

PERFORMANCE ART

According to key informants and FGD participants, the most popular forms of artistic political commentary are Thangyat and Anyeint performances, which usually address federalism, equality, Government and military corruption, rising commodity prices, illegal trade or exploitation of natural resources, electricity shortages, or the shortcomings of the 2008 Constitution. FGD respondents noted that the lyrics in Thangyat and Anyeint songs often help them understand key issues.

²² Maria Danmark and Nyein Ei Ei Htwe, Graffiti show seeks to put local urban art on the map, *Myanmar Times*, February 11, 2013. <https://www.mmmtimes.com/lifestyle/4072-graffiti-show-seeks-to-put-local-urban-art-on-the-map.html>

²³ Nathalie Johnston, Regional street artists gather to share work, ideas and grievances, *Myanmar Times*, February 11, 2013. <https://www.mmmtimes.com/lifestyle/4071-regional-street-artists-gather-to-share-work-ideas-and-grievances.html> Andrew R.C. Marshall, Graffiti artists thrive in reform era Myanmar, *Reuters*, August 27, 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-graffiti/graffiti-artists-thrive-in-reform-era-myanmar-idUSBRE87P0DD20120826>

²⁴

²⁵ Jared Downing, Concrete Canvas, *Frontier Myanmar*, March 2, 2016. <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/concrete-canvas>

²⁶ San Lin Tun, "Beyond the Prison Gate: A tribute to those who sacrifice for democracy", *Myanmar Times*, August 06, 2018. <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/beyond-prison-gate-tribute-those-who-sacrifice-democracy.html>

Thangyat is a traditional performance art, showcased only during the April Thingyan (New Year) Festival, in which groups perform satirical songs to criticize the Government (or, historically, the monarchy) and mirror the feelings of ordinary citizens.²⁷ Thangyat first emerged during the reign of the Bamar Kings and to this day remains a popular form of satire.²⁸ Prominent Thangyat groups in Yangon include *Oway Voice*, the *Peacock Generation*, and *Red of Blue*, as well as university student groups.

Similar to Thangyat, Anyeint is a traditional theatre performance art that delivers messages about political and social issues using humor and irony. According to FGD respondents, the most famous Anyeint artists are Zaganar, Thee Lay Thee, and Myittar. Zaganar is particularly known for the use of satire to criticize military generals and to promote human rights, freedom of expression, and democracy.²⁹ Zaganar has not made many public appearances since the NLD took office, supposedly because of his admiration of Aung San Suu Kyi, whom he referred to as “Auntie Suu” in an interview.³⁰ The three Anyeint artists were arrested for criticizing the Government in the past but have since been released. Many performance artists, like Zaganar, are less vocal in their criticism of the current government. One prominent actor, Hninsi Anyeint, however, openly criticizes the NLD-led Government, and other famous groups, particularly among Yangon youth, are *Hninzi Thakin (Rose Master)* and *Five Hilarious Men*.

CHALLENGES FOR ACTIVISTS

Activism in Yangon is fraught with many challenges. Artists have to be careful about addressing sensitive issues, and many choose to do so by using underground channels or self-censor their work. However, most of the artists and members of bands mentioned in this report were willing to be interviewed by local Mekong Economics researchers, indicating that activists do not exist completely underground as they once did.

CENSORSHIP

The threat of state censorship and arrest are ubiquitous and are the most serious threat to artistic expression and activism in Yangon. A member of *Generation Wave* noted with frustration that the Government often invokes Article 66(D) of the telecommunications law, which is supposed to restrict defamation and hate speech but is often used to punish activists and arrest artists. Fear of arrest has led to self-censorship, which includes not mentioning specific persons or events.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

The Government also restricts activists’ freedom of expression by withholding permission to hold concerts and other public events. According to a sculptor interviewed for this report, the Government does not support the display of contemporary art in public, making it difficult for artists to use public spaces in Yangon to feature prominent pieces.

SOCIETY’S PERCEPTION AND RECEPTION

²⁷ Ye Mon, “Young satirists behind bars”, *Frontier*, May 11, 2019. <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/young-satirists-behind-bars>

²⁸ Zarni Mann, Thangyat Troupe Member Arrested Over Performance Satirizing Military, *The Irrawaddy*, April 19, 2019. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/thangyat-troupe-member-arrested-performance-satirizing-military.html>

²⁹ BBC, BBC Radio Profile of Zarganar: Myanmar’s Greatest Living Comedian (Arts and Human Rights Activist, *Asia Europe Foundation*, July 12, 2013. <https://culture360.asef.org/news-events/bbc-radio-profile-zarganar-myanmars-greatest-living-comedian-arts-and-human-rights/>

³⁰ “Interview: The comedian Zarganar stands up to tyranny in Myanmar,” *The Financial Times* (London, UK) October 3, 2014. <https://www.ft.com/content/e5adbc3c-49bc-11e4-80fb-00144feab7de>

Society's perception of activists is another challenge for artists. Owing to Myanmar's traditional culture, most people, including the FGD participants, favor traditional art over modern forms of expression for political and social activism, so contemporary artists and musicians have a smaller, largely urban, following. The influence of punk rock bands and other counterculture displays are limited to Yangon's youths who, at least somewhat, identify with that particular cultural genre. Art activists' influence is in direct correlation with how popular (or not) their medium is with the general Yangon public. The more popular the music genre or art form, the larger the audience, and therefore the bigger the reach of activists' messages.

LIMITED COLLABORATION WITH OTHER ADVOCACY GROUPS

People interviewed for this report noted that activists rarely collaborate with civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, or international organizations. While these organizations – among them the British Council, the Goethe-Institut Myanmar, the Institut Français de Birmanie, My Yangon My Home, Turning Tables Myanmar, and the Index on Censorship – are helpful in raising awareness and engaging some artists for major events, the *Rebel Riot* musician stressed that relying on funding and platforms from these institutions could limit or undermine their chosen form of expression.

CONCLUSION

Despite exposure to and use of modern forms of expression – activism on social media, punk rock, photography, videography, graffiti art and sculpture – the traditional forms of satire, Thingyat and Anyient, continue to be the most popular forms of activism in Yangon. Underground countercultures reach a much smaller audience.

Social perceptions, while playing a role, are not a huge stumbling block for activists, except for those who engage in artistic expression perceived negatively by the general public, like graffiti art and punk rock. Government restrictions on the freedom of expression are the biggest obstacle for artists engaging in activism, because it imposes limits on the type of art they produce. Activist artists live under constant fear of arrest.

There has been some growth in galleries and exhibitions, with social media expanding their reach. However, public spaces for art installations are off limits, further curbing artists' abilities to reach the general public with their message. The growth of social media holds hope for a wider audience, but artists in Yangon continue to face significant barriers to a fuller range of expression and freedom.

ANNEX: EXAMPLES OF ACTIVIST ART AND ARTISTS IN YANGON



The punk group *Rebel Riot* promoting coexistence of religions for which they came under fire from Ma Ba Tha.³¹



A member of the *Peacock Generation* Thangyat group who was imprisoned in April due to criticizing the military in a performance.³² This Thangyat group is one of the more well-known, according the FGD respondents.

³¹ Coconuts Yangon, "Punk band Rebel Riot apologizes to Buddhist Supremacists for Interfaith Photoshoot", *Coconuts Yangon*, March 31, 2017. <https://coconuts.co/yanon/news/punk-band-rebel-riot-apologizes-to-buddhist-supremacists-for-interfaith-photoshoot/>

³² The Irrawaddy, "Five Members of Thangyat Troupe Jailed for Criticizing Military", *The Irrawaddy*, April 22, 2019. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/five-members-of-thangyat-troupe-jailed-for-criticizing-military.html>



Phyu Mon, a prominent performance artist, using balloons to represent the pressures of censorship on the media in Myanmar.³³



Street artist Arkar Kyaw creates a mural welcoming Barack Obama to Yangon in 2012.³⁴

³³ Nathalie Johnston, "The Mobility of Struggle: Myanmar's Performance Art as Protest", *Interartive*, July 13, 2013. <https://interartive.org/2014/01/myanmars-performance>

³⁴ Tom Foreman, "Foreman: My last letter to the president", *CNN*, January 19, 2013. <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/18/politics/foreman-last-letter-to-president/index.html>



A mural under a bridge on the Yangon circle line. Much of Yangon's street art "exists in a murky legal area". Regardless of its subject matter, some members of the public consider it a form of activism.³⁵



A cartoon drawn by Lai Lone in January 2019, depicting the instability of dam construction projects in Myanmar.³⁶

³⁵ Nandar Aung, "Out of the Shadows, into the Shop," *Myanmar Times* (Yangon, Myanmar) March 22, 2018. <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/out-shadows-shop.html>

³⁶ Lai Lone, "Irrawaddy Myitsone Dam", *Cartoon Movement*, January 16, 2019. <https://www.cartoonmovement.com/cartoon/55447>



Letters to Caesar performing at the Voice of Youth music festival in 2017. A link to their performance can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/TurningTablesMyanmar/videos/1708905925799431/?v=1708905925799431>